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English Language Teaching in Nepal: Research, Reflection and Practice

Edited by David Hayes

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The Impact of the School Leaving Certificate Examination on English Language Teaching and Student Motivation to Learn English

The Impact of the School Leaving Certificate Examination on English Language Teaching and Student Motivation to Learn English

Saraswati Dawadi

Introduction

Many countries around the world use high-stakes examinations¹ to bring about desired changes in their education systems and there has been extensive research on the impact of those examinations. High-stakes examinations can serve several important functions, besides measuring the purported skills of test takers. The School Leaving Certificate (SLC) examination in Nepal, the focus of this chapter, besides certifying the school level achievement of students, also acts as a gateway to higher education, a measure of the quality of education and a basic license for official employment. Additionally, it is the sole factor that dictates one's career path, as the scores decide which course a student can study in higher education (Shrestha, 2003). The SLC results may, in addition, be taken as a measure of "what strengths and weaknesses exist in the education system at a given point in time and how the education system is performing over the years" (Mathema and Bista, 2006, p.4).

However, the SLC examination as a whole is not free from criticisms, despite several efforts made by the Nepalese government to make it capable of triggering positive impact on instructional practices and on its stakeholders. To be more specific, it is usually argued that the SLC examination has a negative impact on instructional practices while examination reform initiatives of the Ministry of Education (MoE) in Nepal seem to be directed more towards administrative reforms than improving the quality of the examinations themselves (Budhathoki, Khatri, Shrestha, Sigdel, Panta and Thapa, 2014).

The SLC English examination, the test under investigation, is similarly the object of considerable criticism. Pinpointing the weaknesses of the examination format, Giri (2005) recommends changing it and making it compatible with the curriculum. He argues that "changing the nature of the English test could exert positive washback

¹ 'Examination' and 'test' are used interchangeably in this chapter, though I recognise the distinction between formal examinations and classroom tests.

effects and potentially change the entire English language teaching and testing practices in Nepal” (Giri, 2005, p.10). It is worth mentioning that there have been some changes in the examination format recently; however, very little is known about their pedagogical impact. But, if the impact of a high-stakes examination is not known, this might have undesirable consequences in society (Messick, 1988). It is potentially like “a police force without a court system, unfair and dangerous” (McNamara, 2007, p.280). Therefore, the rationale for this study begins with the need to explore the impact of the SLC English examination on instructional practices and student motivation to learn English.

Background to the study: the impact of high-stakes tests in other countries

The effects of high-stakes tests on teaching and learning are called ‘washback effects’ (Green, 2007; Khaniya, 1990), which can be either positive or negative. Recent educational practice indicates that tests are designed to prompt students and teachers to adjust their behaviors to fall in line with the testing apparatus (Carless and Lam, 2014). “Underlying this power-coercive, top-down approach to educational reform is the assumption that high-stakes tests possess the power to exert an expected influence on learning because of the consequences they bring about” (Luxia, 2007, p.52). Unfortunately, however, this may not happen in all contexts.

It is usually argued that an initial step in washback is for a test first to influence teachers’ perceptions and attitudes, which should in turn affect their instructional practices (Abu-Alhija, 2007; Onaiba, 2013). Yet, Tsagari (2006), who investigated the influence of the First Certificate in English examination (a high-stakes test in Greece) on Greek teachers’ perceptions, found that its impact was to make teachers feel anxious and stressed and that they tried hard to cover all the contents in the syllabus. Similarly, Onaiba (2013) reported negative attitudes of Libyan teachers towards examinations. In contrast, Wall’s (2005) observations and interviews with teachers from Sri Lanka found that they had mixed but mainly positive attitudes towards the Sri Lankan O Level examination. Additionally, Amengual-Pizarro (2009) reported that the majority of teachers in her study had positive attitudes towards the English test in the Spanish University Entrance Examination; they thought the test to be useful, necessary and reliable.

It is contended that tests also affect teaching content and methodology with teachers designing their teaching materials and content around tests, a process called curriculum alignment (Cheng, 2005; Choi; 2008). However, Gorsuch (2000), who explored teachers’ classroom practices in relation to EFL curriculum reform in Japanese high-schools, reported that teachers did not focus equally on all the language skills despite the reform which urged teachers to use them. Similarly, secondary school English teachers in India tended to marginalize oral skills on their teaching agenda as they were not tested in the examination, though the teaching syllabus focused on developing these skills (Agrawal, 2004). Onaiba (2013) also reported that Libyan teachers tended to select content directly related to the test and narrow down the syllabus to meet test content, though their teaching methodology was not affected. Other studies (e.g. Andrews, 1995; Cheng, 1998; Luxia, 2007) have reported that language tests affect teaching content but not teaching methods.

Elsewhere, Nikolov (1999), having observed 118 lessons in secondary schools in Hungary, reported the effects of the Hungarian school-leaving examination on the pedagogical practices of secondary classes. She found that the most frequent task types in the lessons were “question-answer, translation, reading aloud and grammar exercises in the form of substitution drills” which were typical language examination techniques of the examination in operation at the time (Nikolov, 1999, p.243). Similarly, Ahmad and Rao (2012) reported that higher secondary level teachers’ teaching methodology in Pakistan was directly influenced by examinations. Luxia (2007) also claimed that teaching methodology in secondary schools in China went against the National Matriculation English Test designers’ intention.

Some other studies have explored examination effects on student learning. For instance, Hughes (1988) reported that a new English test implemented in a Turkish university greatly improved students’ English proficiency, a year after the test was implemented. However, as pointed out by Tsagari (2006), his methodology is problematic as the students’ performances were compared using another test (the Michigan Test) to which the university test had no resemblance. Similar kinds of demonstrable gains in student learning that can be tied to the use of a newly designed test have been documented by Saif (2006). Data, generated through interviews, observations and test administration, illustrated that a new spoken test implemented at the University of Victoria, Canada had a positive relationship with teaching and learning outcomes. Additionally, in Shohamy, Dointsa-Schmidt and Ferman’s (1996) study in Israel, the majority of students, who were preparing for a high-stakes English test, expressed positive views towards the test; they reported that the test promoted their learning.

In contrast, other studies have reported negative washback effects of language tests on student learning. For instance, Cheng (1998) reported negative effects of the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination in English. Similarly, Takagi’s (2010) study of Japanese students preparing for the University Entrance Examination found that the students were not motivated in developing communicative English language skills; they focused only on the skills assessed by the exams. Likewise, Xiao, Sharpling and Liu (2011), having collected data from test takers of the National Matriculation English Test in China, reported that “the development of learning strategies and reading skills was overshadowed by the high-stakes nature of the test” (p.103).

In contrast to this literature on high stakes tests around the globe, very little is known about the impacts of the SLC English examination in Nepal. To the best of the author’s knowledge, only one empirical study (Khaniya, 1990) has explored the washback effects of the SLC English examination, and this was almost three decades ago. This study collected data from different types of schools in Nepal, different in terms of their teaching focuses: skill emphasizing schools (Type A) and exam emphasizing schools (Type B). A new examination was designed and the results in the new examination were compared with the existing one. The results indicated that Type A schools obtained significantly higher scores in the new examination than Type B ($F = 144.08$; $p < .06$). However, the study lacks evidence about actual instructional practices and whether they were affected by the test; the results alone do not tell us anything about what was actually taught under the influence of the test. It seems to have been taken for granted that the schools

were teaching English differently because of the SLC English examination. Thus, the study seems to have deterministic assumptions and to be based on conjecture (Alderson and Wall, 1993).

The SLC and the Nepali education system

The context for this study is the SLC examination conducted at the end of 10-year school education in Nepal to students of 15 to 16 years old. The examination has been centrally controlled by the SLC examination Board, a constituent organization within the Ministry of Education. The Board has been conducting the exam every year with a steadily increasing number of candidates from a few hundred to 774,970 in 2016 (Rauniyar, 2016). In 2016 a letter grading system was introduced into the examination, though practice since the test's inception has been the scoring of answer sheets.

The SLC English examination, the test under investigation, focuses primarily on candidates' reading and writing skills rather than on more communicative competence models. The examination is divided into two parts: a written test and a speaking test. The written test (that covers 75% of the grade) tests the reading and writing skills of students and is centrally controlled by the Board, whereas the speaking test (that covers 25% of the grade) tests listening and speaking skills and is currently conducted by the schools themselves, although it was also controlled by the Board in previous years.

It is also worth mentioning that the Ministry of Education has recently amended the Eighth Education Act. The new act has categorized school education into two levels: basic education (Grade I to VIII) and secondary education (Grade IX to XII). Accordingly, the current SLC examination conducted at the end of grade 10 has been scrapped and the new school leaving examination, which will be controlled by the newly established National Exam Board (MoE, 2016), will be conducted at the end of grade 12.

Given the very limited research into the impact of the SLC and the changing scenario in the Nepalese education system, this study is designed to fill a substantial gap in the literature. The specific research questions to be addressed are:

- a. How do secondary level English teachers in Nepal perceive the SLC English examination?
- b. Does the SLC English examination affect instructional practices? If it does, what is the nature and scope of the effects?

Methodology

■ Participants

The participants in the study were 120 secondary level English teachers representing six different districts in Nepal: Kathmandu, Lalitpur, Chitwan, Nawal Parasi, Lamjung and Tanahau. The districts were selected on the basis of the Development Regions of Nepal, three districts (Kathmandu, Lalitpur and Chitwan) from Central Development Region and the rest of the districts from Western Development Region. Then, 20 teachers from each district were randomly

selected. The teachers were in the 25 to 58 years age range, with 3 to 34 years teaching experience. The vast majority of teachers were Master's degree holders and many of them had gone through different kinds of teacher training programs. However, while some teachers (55 %) had received both pre-service and in-service training, others (28%) had received only in-service training and a substantial minority (17%) were deprived of any sort of teacher training. They teach five to six classes every day and have 10 to 45 students per class at Grade 10.

■ Research tools

The tools used in the study were: a questionnaire that consisted of both closed-ended and open-ended questions about teachers' opinion on the SLC English examination, a class observation scheme and interview guidelines (see Appendix 1). The questionnaire was written in English as the vast majority of teachers in the study had earned Master's degrees in English or in English Language teaching and are teaching English to secondary level students in Nepal. The questionnaire was also piloted on six other teachers with similar backgrounds, which ensured teachers' ability to understand the language used in the questionnaire. However, participants were free to use either English or Nepali during the interviews, as they wished.

■ Data collection procedures

After obtaining oral consent from the teachers to participate in the study, they were asked to fill out the questionnaires privately and these were collected later. Then, eight teachers (four from each Development Region) were randomly selected for class observation and one class of each teacher was observed, using the observation scheme, to check consistency with teachers' expressed views. Finally, each teacher was interviewed immediately after the class observation. Prior to the interview, they were told that they could use either English or Nepali or mix both languages during the interview. The researcher started the interview mixing both the languages to make them feel comfortable to use the language of their choice. However, almost all the teachers preferred English over Nepali during the interviews. Following Cavendish (2011), all the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed using a clean transcript, eliminating the pauses, false starts and fillers that are common in everyday speech.

■ Data analysis

The quantitative data collected through the questionnaire were analysed using SPSS 22, which provided the mean scores and percentages for each item. The qualitative data were analysed using NVivo 10 (Lewins and Silver, 2014). While coding the data, the abduction method was used to capture all the issues emerging through the data.

Results

The results of the study are presented in two sections, according to the research questions.

■ Teachers' perceptions of the SLC examination

The first area of exploration was teachers' perceptions of the SLC examination. In this section, two sub-themes relating to teachers' perceptions are categorized, namely: a) teachers' perceptions of the reasons behind implementing the grading

system; and b) teachers’ attitudes towards the SLC examination and its quality.

a) Teachers’ perceptions of the reasons behind implementing the grading system

Table 1 summarizes teachers’ perceptions of the reasons behind introducing the new grading system, giving the mean scores on a Likert scale of agreement.

Table 1 : Teachers’ perceptions of the reasons behind implementing the letter grading system

Q12. In your opinion, what are the main reasons for introducing the grading system in the SLC English test?							
Variables	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	mean	SD
Just to increase the pass percentage of students.	26.4%	52.1%	5.8%	8.3%	6.6%	3.84	1.11
To bring positive changes in teaching and learning English.	10.4%	15.5%	7.6%	57.3%	9.1%	3.83	1.07
To eliminate the risk of cheating and other malpractices.	13.2%	31.4%	16.5%	22.3%	14.9%	3.40	4.04
To disseminate the results quickly, adequately and as transparently as possible.	12.4%	38.8%	19%	19.8%	9.1%	3.25	1.18

Questionnaire findings in this category revealed, to some extent, teachers’ mixed views, though there is a considerable agreement and disagreement with the first two reasons: increasing the pass percentage of students (26.4% strongly agree, 52.1% agree) and bringing positive changes in teaching and learning English (75.3% strongly disagree, 9.1% disagree).

The above finding was reflected in the perceptions elicited from interviews conducted with a sample of the teachers. During teachers’ interviews, most of the teachers declared that the major aim of imposing the letter grading system was to increase the pass percentage of students, but not to bring about positive changes in classroom practices. The following is a representative quote:

In the previous years, more than half of the students could not pass the SLC examination, which had been a shame for the whole country. But this year the vast majority of students are able to go through the examination

because of this grading system. It seems that this system is introduced just to increase pass percentage of students, but not to bring positive changes in teaching and learning activities.

Both the questionnaire and interview results indicated mixed views of teachers regarding the possibility that the test eliminates the risk of cheating and other malpractices in the examination. For example, Teacher A argued that *“The grading system is an attempt to discourage students from cheating in the examination.”* Two more teachers expressed similar views. However, the rest of the teachers did not think that the grading system would eliminate the problem of cheating in the examination as reported by Teacher D: *“Students’ scores are simply converted into grades and there is no change in the examination system. So, we cannot expect that this grading system eliminates cheating in the examination.”*

About half of the teachers (51.2%) seemed to believe that the grading system aims to disseminate the results quickly, adequately and transparently. However, during the interviews, almost all the teachers reported that they did not experience any difference between the scoring system and the grading system in this respect. Also, they thought that the results were not transparent.

However, as they noted in the space for open-ended responses, it was found that some teachers surveyed had positive views towards the grading system. They perceived decreasing the rate of drop-outs and following the international testing format as other reasons behind implementing the grading system. Here is a representative view:

I think the government of Nepal has introduced the grading system to meet the international standard. Whatever the reason is, the grading system has dramatically decreased drop-outs rates as almost all students got chance to go to higher education.

Some surveyed teachers and four of the interviewed teachers also reported that they did not know the relationship between students’ grade and their subject selection in higher education. They reported that they are confused about how students’ grades on different subjects affect the students’ subject choice at Grade 11. One of the teachers reported,

I do not understand the meaning of getting C or D grades. I mean, I do not know whether the students who get C Grade on a particular subject are allowed to study the same course or subject at Grade 11. For instance, if a student gets C grade in English, is he allowed to study major English at Grade 11? Or, is there any rule like the students must get A Grade in minimum five subjects if they wish to study science at Grade 11?

However, many teachers appreciated that the grading system had a positive impact on educational practice. They also argued that for consistency the grading system should not be applied only to the SLC examination but should be applied right from the beginning grades.

b) Teachers’ attitudes towards the test fairness and its quality

Q13 asked for teachers’ views about the test fairness and its quality. The findings

are presented in Table 2. More than 50% of teachers considered the exam to be fair (19% strongly agreed, 46.3% agreed) and a good indicator of students’ ability in using the language skills (11.6% strongly agreed, 58.7% agreed).

Table 2 : Teachers’ attitudes towards the test fairness and its quality

Q13. How do you judge the SLC English test?							
Variables	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	mean	SD
It is a fair test in terms of its grading system.	19.0%	46.3%	13.2%	17.4%	3.3%	3.60	1.08
It is a good indicator of students’ ability in using language in real life situations.	11.6%	58.7%	14.9%	12.4%	1.7%	3.66	.90
It reflects students’ weaknesses and strengths clearly.	18.2%	38.0%	17.4%	20.7%	5.0%	3.44	1.15
It can discriminate well among the students.	5.8%	41.3%	16.5%	29.8%	5.8%	3.11	1.08

However, the interview results did not verify the findings of the questionnaire. All the interviewed teachers raised questions regarding the test fairness and its quality. The following quotation illustrates this point:

The exam results do not reflect students’ real levels in English and also cannot discriminate well among students as almost all students get full marks in the speaking test. The schools send scores without testing their students. So, some students, who cannot utter even a single sentence in English, are also very likely to get full marks in the speaking test, which is not fair at all.

Similarly, in the survey almost 50% of teachers believed that the test discriminates well among the students (5.8% strongly agreed, 41.3% agreed) but, in contrast to perceptions of test fairness, almost all the interviewed teachers reported the same view. Some teachers’ open-ended responses to Q13 indicated that we need a more collaborative testing approach and some improvements in our test design. For example:

The test should focus more on communicative skills of the students. For this, we need a more collaborative approach of testing. We also need to change the current question pattern which encourages recitation. We need to

focus more on creative questions so that students will be discouraged from cheating in the examination.

■ **Test impact on instructional practices**

The second area of exploration concerned the impact of the test on teachers’ everyday classroom instructional practices and four sub-themes relating to test impact were categorized, namely: a) test impact on students’ motivation to learn English; b) test impact on teaching content; c) test impact on classroom teaching methodology and; d) test impact on classroom assessment.

a) Test impact on student motivation to learn English

Teachers’ responses, as summarized in Table 3, indicate that the test affects students’ motivation to learn English; the vast majority of teachers opine that the test motivates students to learn English (27% strongly agreed, 54.5% agreed). However, most of the interviewed teachers argued that the test motivates students to develop only reading and writing skills, but not listening and speaking skills. Many teachers (63.6%) also believe that the test has had a positive impact on reducing drop-out rates.

Table 3 : Test impact on student motivation to learn English

Q14. What are the impacts of the test on student motivation to learn English?							
Variables	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	mean	SD
The test motivates them to learn English.	27.3%	54.5%	4.1%	12.4%	0.8%	3.95	.94
The test discourages them from learning English.	0.8%	12.4%	8.3%	62.8%	14.0%	2.40	2.17
The test does not affect their motivation to learn English.	4.1%	18.2%	8.3%	53.7%	14.9%	2.42	1.08
The test has led students to drop out of secondary school.	3.3%	21.5%	10.7%	40.5%	23.1%	2.40	1.16

Teachers also showed their concern about the test design. Teacher C stressed:

Some questions in the examination are repeated every year and are designed in such a way that it just tests students’ memorization. Consequently, students prefer to memorise answers over developing their

language skills. Therefore, I see the problem in question designing. Why can't we design questions in such a way that students are discouraged from reciting answers?

Teacher E added:

This exam never motivates students to use integrated skills. It also does not cover the whole syllabus. It only tests reading and writing improperly, and to some extent grammar, and neglects testing the communicative aspects of the language, though the existing teaching syllabus recommends them.

Despite the above negative views almost all the teachers praised the examination in terms of its power to control drop-out rates. They believe that because of the grading system, more students are getting access to higher education and there is a sharp decrease in drop-out rates, which had been a serious problem in previous years.

b) Test impact on teaching content selection

The survey results (summarized in Table 4) show that the examination had a very limited washback effect on teachers' choice of teaching content as the majority of teachers seemed not to teach only the test content. They also seemed to have an equal focus on all the language skills and also on integrated skills.

Table 4 : Test impact on teaching content selection

Q15. What contents and/or skills are focused on in your teaching of English to Grade 10 students?							
Variables	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	mean	SD
I focus only on the contents that are examined in the test.	3.3%	16.5%	6.6%	59.5%	13.2%	2.36	1.02
I focus more on reading and writing than on listening and speaking.	6.6%	28.1%	8.3%	43.3%	13.2%	2.71	1.20
I focus more on listening and speaking than on reading and writing.	5.0%	16.5%	7.4%	59.5%	10.7%	2.45	1.05
I focus more on integrated skills than on individual skills.	25.6%	52.9%	8.3%	12.4%	0.8%	3.92	.91

Variables	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	mean	SD
I have a great focus on grammar and vocabulary.	25.6%	47.9%	5.8%	15.7%	4.1%	3.75	1.13

However, the questionnaire results do not correspond with the interview results. During the interviews, almost all the teachers reported that they focus only on the skills/contents that are tested. Here is a representative view:

I do not teach all the contents given in the text book. I spend quite a lot time on the contents that are possible to be asked in the examination. The thirty years' experience I have as an English teacher helped me to expect the questions that might be in the exam. Therefore, I focus on those sections of the textbook and skip others. For instance, I concentrate on the reading passages and grammar section and ignore listening and speaking exercises. Frankly speaking, I do not teach listening and speaking as the skills are not tested in the examination.

Additionally, most teachers also reported that they do not have any audio material to use in their school and also they have not yet seen the Grade 10 curriculum. They just rely on the textbook in their teaching.

With regard to developing integrated language skills in students, there is a discrepancy between what teachers expressed through the questionnaire and their classroom practices. The questionnaire data indicated that the overwhelming majority of teachers focus on integrated skills. However, six of the interviewed teachers stated that they teach the language skills separately. During class observation as well, it was observed that teachers were teaching language skills (such as reading) separately and none of the teachers were seen teaching listening and speaking skills. Nonetheless, two teachers reported that they do focus on integrated skills.

The vast majority of teachers reported that they have a great focus on grammar and vocabulary (25% strongly agreed, 47.9% agreed) and the interview results revealed similar findings. It was revealed through the interviews that selecting the grammar sections and teaching them deductively to students in separate lessons was a common practice amongst these teachers.

c) Test impact on teaching methodology

The teachers were asked to report whether they think that their teaching methodology has been affected by the SLC examination. Among the 120 teachers surveyed, 96 teachers (80%) agreed with the statement and then provided responses to Q16. Their responses are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5 : Test impact on teaching methodology

Q16. Are there any effects of the test on your teaching methodology? (Delete as appropriate)Yes/ No. If you answered NO, go straight to question 17; if you answered YES, continue this question.							
Variables	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	mean	SD
I feel that I am driven by the test rather than the textbook/ curriculum.	13.54%	33.3%	13.54%	32.29%	7.29%	3.13	1.21
The test has led me to teach in ways that contradict my own ideas of good educational practice.	8.33%	55.20%	15.6%2	20.83%	-	3.51	.91
I focus on skill development in my students.	40.32%	48.95%	6.25%	.96%	-	4.35	.64

The results are highly compatible with the teachers’ views reported in interviews where teachers revealed they are driven by the examination rather than the curriculum and they feel that their teaching practice contradicts their own idea of good teaching. Teacher H reported:

My way of teaching has been very different from how a teacher should teach regarding the principles of the prescribed curriculum. I am usually the dominant speaker in my class adhering to a teacher-centred approach in my instruction although I think that students learn better if I use communicative methods. The curriculum also recommends me to apply communicative techniques and activities. But, the problem is that if I use communicative methodology, I can’t complete the course in time and do not have enough time to prepare my students for the examination.

Teacher B added:

I usually focus on teaching language rules directly using Nepali sometimes and ask my students to memorize the rules. This is because of the SLC examination and because of three other reasons: big classes, students’ low levels in English and insufficient time allotted for teaching English.

Although the vast majority of teachers surveyed reported that they focus on skill development in their students, during class observation it was seen that most of

the teachers were using teacher-centred methods and encouraging their students to recite answers. During the interviews, most of the teachers also stressed that they needed to focus on the exam rather than on skill development. One teacher expressed it in this way:

I usually make my students practice exam-related activities and train them on mock exams similar to the SLC exam. Also, I encourage them to memorize some answers. My focus is on helping students to get good scores as my teaching quality is judged on the basis of the grades they get in the examination. So, it's my compulsion.

During the class observation, none of the teachers were found using any other teaching material except the English text book. However, two of the interviewed teachers commented that they sometimes use other teaching materials such as pictures, newspapers and audio-video materials. All the interviewed teachers reported that they use commercially produced test preparation material entitled ‘Ten Sets’, which is a collection of the test questions from previous years.

d) Test impact on classroom assessment

Finally, the teachers were asked to give their views about the test impacts on their classroom assessment. The results are presented in table 6.

Table 6 : Test impact on classroom assessment

Q17. How do you assess your students?							
Variables	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	mean	SD
I use real life tasks.	25.6%	64.5%	5.8%	3.3%	-	4.13	.66
My classroom tests mirror the tasks of the SLC English test.	15.7%	67.8%	5.8%	9.1%	0.8%	3.89	.80
I use the SLC English test papers from previous years.	22.3%	55.4%	6.6%	12.4%	2.5%	3.83	.99
I test only the skills tested in the SLC examination.	3.3%	33.3%	11.7%	45.8%	5.8%	2.82	1.06

The impact of the test on classroom assessment is not clear. The vast majority of teachers reported that they use real life tasks to test their students (25.6% strongly agree, 64.5% agree) but nearly the same number of teachers also reported that their classroom tests mirror the SLC English examination (15.7% strongly agree, 67.5% agree) and they use the old test papers to test their

students (22.3% strongly agree, 55.4% agree). However, almost all the teachers interviewed mentioned that they do not use real life tasks but they use old test papers to ensure that the SLC examination tasks are mirrored in their classroom tests. As one teacher said:

My classroom tests are very similar to the SLC test. I follow the pattern of the SLC test right from the beginning of the academic year so that my students get practise with the SLC test. I usually do not design test items myself. I select them from the SLC questions collection.

Responses to Q.17 also revealed that a large number of teachers test only the skills tested in the SLC examination (3.3% strongly agree, 33.3% agree). During the interviews as well, five of the teachers (out of eight) reported that they test only the skills tested in the SLC examination.

Additionally, the teachers were also asked to report whether they run classes for test preparation. The results indicated that 119 out of the 120 teachers run test preparation classes. Then, those 119 teachers were also asked to report an approximate number of classes they run for test preparation. It was found that the number of classes varied among the teachers.

Table 7 : Test preparation classes run by the teachers

Q. 18 Approximately how many classes PER YEAR do you spend preparing students for the test?	1-10 classes	11-20 classes	20-30 classes	More than 30
	28.1%	34.7%	10.7%	24.8%

Those 119 teachers were also asked to mention the time they start to run test related activities.

Table 8 : Time teachers start to run test preparation activities

Q19. When do you run the test preparation activities?	1-2 months before the test	3-4 months before the test	5-6 months before the test	7-8 months before the test	9-10 months before the test	Through out the year
	39.7%	1.6%	5.8%	0.8%	19%	33.1%

Interestingly, 33.1% of teachers reported that they run such activities throughout the year and a further 19% start 9-10 months before the examination, implying that the majority of classes are in a state of almost constant preparation. The largest single group of 39.7% of teachers said that they start such activities just 1-2 months before the examination with smaller numbers of other teachers in between this and the 9-10 months range. However, whenever they start, the focus in those classes seem very similar as all the interviewed teachers reported that students just repeat what they have already learnt, and practise with the ‘Ten Sets’ in these classes.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the SLC examination, to a large extent, has negative washback, which is incompatible with the intended washback envisaged by the exam constructors.

Discussion

The findings of this study were grounded in data gathered in three phases: survey, class observation and interview. Discussions of the main findings are guided by the themes developed on the basis of the two research questions.

a) Teachers' perceptions of the SLC examination

The first area of exploration was teachers' perceptions of the reasons behind introducing the letter grading system in the examination and the examination quality. Questionnaire results revealed mixed views about the reasons for implementing the letter grading system in the SLC examination. However, unlike Wall (2005) and Amengual-Pizarro's (2009) findings, most teachers in the study held negative attitudes towards the test. Their perceptions of the reasons for implementing the grading system were to some extent inconsistent with the underlying theories behind the grading system as they believe that increasing the pass percentage of students, rather than bringing about positive changes in teaching and learning English, was the main reason behind implementing the grading system. The incompatibility between teachers' perceptions and policy makers' intentions suggests negative reactions towards the implementation.

The results also raised questions about the fairness of the test and its quality. Although slightly more than half of the teachers surveyed considered the exam to be fair and a good indicator of students' ability in using the language, all the interviewed teachers disagreed with this contention. The teachers argued that the exam results do not reflect students' real levels in English and also cannot discriminate well among students. Indicating that the problem lay mainly with the speaking test, they maintained that schools give full marks to all the students in the speaking tests without testing their skills. Consequently, the test neither reflects students' weaknesses and strengths, nor discriminates well amongst students.

As reported by the teachers, the examination does not seem to be able to control malpractices associated with the test. This argument is, to some extent, verified by Das's (04 April, 2016) report about students who were expelled from the examination hall of the SLC examination because of their attempt to cheat and Jha's (07 April, 2016) report on an attempt to send examination supervisors in an illegal way by some Ministry of Education personnel, which supported that cheating in the examination persists.

However, some surveyed teachers and all the interviewed teachers welcomed the grading system as they thought that the grading system decreased drop-out rates and more students obtained access to higher education in the current year. Some teachers also reported that the grading system needs to be introduced right from the beginning grades. They also reported that the grading system confused them a lot, particularly in relation to students' subject choice in higher education.

b) Test impact on instructional practices

The second area of exploration concerned the impact of the test on teachers'

everyday instructional practices. The questionnaire and interview questions regarding this theme were developed following washback hypotheses taken from Alderson and Wall (1993, pp. 120-121) that a test will influence “what teachers teach, how teachers teach and what students learn”.

The results of this study provide support to Alderson and Wall’s (1993) assumption that the test affects what students learn. The vast majority of surveyed teachers reported that the test motivates students to learn English. However, the interview results indicated that the test motivates students to develop their reading and writing skills, but not listening and speaking skills. The main reason behind this is that tests in reading and writing skills are controlled by the exam Board while tests in speaking and listening are controlled at the school level. This is consistent with Takagi’s (2018) finding that takers focused only on the skills assessed by the test, suggesting a negative impact of the test on student motivation to improve speaking and listening skills.

The SLC examination also seems to induce pervasive negative washback on teaching content selection of the current curriculum as teachers focused on activities/lessons from various units in the prescribed textbooks, and neglected others that were deemed important in the curriculum. Thus, consistent with Onabia’s (2013) findings, the results indicated that teachers narrowed the content of the curriculum to mirror the content of the examination. The findings also echoed those of Andrews (1995), who claimed that teachers gave too much emphasis to exam-related materials, which he considered “a limiting of focus for teachers and students rather than a broadening of horizons” (p.80). Such findings were also recorded by a number of other previous washback studies carried out in different contexts (e.g Cheng, 2005; Abu-Alhija, 2007; Choi, 2008) where the teachers were found to restrict the curriculum only to those aspects most likely to appear in the examination.

Additionally, all the interviewed teachers were found using only the textbook as teaching material for their usual classes and commercially produced test preparation material for test preparation classes, though two of them said that they sometimes used self-made materials. This finding is contrary to Watanabe’s (2000) and Tsagari’s (2009) findings that teachers used a variety of self-made materials.

The results also suggest that the SLC examination impacted, to a certain extent, upon teachers’ instructional techniques. The interview data, complemented by class observation, revealed that most of the teachers were reluctant to apply a communicative approach upon which the principles of the current Grade 10 curriculum of English are based. Very similar to the claim made by Onaiba (2013), most teachers, in response to test demands and their students’ expectations, appeared to adhere to teacher-centred approaches to language teaching with a dominant role in classroom instruction. The most frequent activity carried out by teachers during the class observations was reading of the text by the teachers and describing the text using both Nepali and English, followed by question-answer recitation provided by the teachers. Communicative activities such as group work or discussion with integrated language tasks were not evident in any class, even though the SLC English curriculum expects students to develop those skills in more learner-centred classrooms. Additionally, almost all of the interviewed teachers

stated that they do not teach listening and speaking as these skills are not tested by the SLC Board and they are free to send any scores they want. The findings reflect those of Gorsuch (1999) and Agrawal's (2004) studies, in Japanese and Indian contexts respectively, that although the curriculum urged teachers to use communicative and integrated language skills, they tended to marginalize skills not tested in the examinations.

The test also seems to affect classroom assessment. The vast majority of the teachers reported that their tests mirror the SLC English examination tasks and they even use the old SLC examination questions to test their students. A large number of teachers test only the skills tested by the SLC. Additionally, almost all the teachers run test preparation classes, though they vary in terms of the number of these classes that they take and the time they begin to run them.

Thus, teachers seemed to be driven by the SLC examination rather than the curriculum. The teachers themselves feel that their teaching practice contradicts their own idea of good teaching. They were not self-satisfied with their teaching approach and the exam-tailored activities they performed in their classes. However, they felt compelled to raise students' scores in the test as their own quality would be judged on the basis of their students' SLC grades and there is unhealthy competition between the schools. This finding, to some extent, is compatible with that of some other studies (e.g. Burrow, 2004 and Amengual-Pizarro, 2009) that teachers changed their teaching methods according to the demands of the test. However, the finding is inconsistent with the findings of others (Cheng, 2005) that the way the teachers carried out their teaching remained unchanged even after implementing a new testing policy, i.e teachers kept on using their traditional techniques although the new testing policy had a great focus on communicative skills, and those by Onaiba (2013) and Wall and Alderson (1993) which found limited clear-cut evidence of the relationship between the tests and teachers' teaching methods.

Nevertheless, considering the inconsistent results of previous studies in this regard, one might argue that in this study it is not evident that the SLC examination is the solitary reason behind these practices. Other variables may come into play such as teachers' beliefs, qualifications, gender, training status and experience, and contextual factors such as large classes, students' low levels of English and parents' and schools' pressure to raise students' scores, suggesting that teachers felt extra pressure from the exam, resulting in "a tension between pedagogical and ethical decisions" (Spratt, 2005, p.24). However, although it seems that the degree of test impact depends on how different test related "variables interact with the test, the test per se still, in many cases, remains the overriding variable that does have a direct effect on washback" (Onaiba, 2013, p. 249).

Conclusion

This study aimed at investigating secondary level teachers' attitudes towards the SLC English test and its washback effects. The data, contrary to Wall (2005) and Amengual-Pizarro's (2009) findings, revealed mixed but mainly negative attitudes of the teachers towards the SLC English examination. The test seems to lead to a series of negative consequences on student motivation, classroom instruction and content selection. Very similar to what has been found in Chinese and

Pakastini contexts, as reported by Luxia (2007) and Rao (2012) respectively, the teaching methodology in Nepalese schools goes against the curriculum designers' intentions. Although the curriculum urges teachers to use communicative and integrated language skills, they just follow a traditional teaching approach, narrowing down the curriculum to mirror test contents. The development of listening and speaking is thus overshadowed by the examination. Additionally, classroom assessment practice is negatively affected by the test; a large number of teachers do not design test items themselves; instead they just select the items from the SLC questions collection. However, the test seems to be able to decrease high drop-out rates and give more students access to higher education.

The results of this study suggest that the listening and speaking elements of the SLC English examination also need to be controlled externally to motivate both the teachers and students to focus on these skills. Students' communicative skills should be tested and teachers should be encouraged to use communicative methods in their teaching while unhealthy competition among the schools to raise students' grades should be controlled. Additionally, the test should be designed in such a way that it creates a space for testing students' creativity and discourages them from memorising answers and cheating in the examination. It is also recommended that the grading system should be introduced right from the beginning grades of formal schooling to bring consistency in testing practice. Finally, the teachers seem confused about the value of different grades, particularly in relation to their subject choice in higher education. They do not know whether the students with Grade C on a particular subject are allowed to study the same course at Grade 11. Thus, more information should be given to teachers on the issue as soon as possible.

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About the author

Saraswati Dawadi completed her Masters in English Education from Tribhuvan University, Nepal in 2004, and an MA in TESOL from Lancaster University in the UK in 2014. She also received a Masters in Research Studies from the Open University, UK, in 2015 where she is currently a PhD scholar. Her doctoral research focuses on the social and educational impacts of the SLC English test, particularly the pre-test and post-test impacts on students and their parents. Her interest in this research area is derived from her own experience of taking the test and working with students in diverse social contexts in Nepal.

Appendix 1: Research tools

A. Questionnaire

Dear Teacher,

I would like to let you know that I am conducting a small research survey on the SLC English test. It would be a great help for me if you could fill out the questionnaire. Please be assured that your participation in the study is completely voluntary and all the information you provide me through this questionnaire will be anonymous and will be used only for the research purpose. Please read the instructions very carefully before responding to each question and provide answers as accurate as possible. If you have any doubts about any of the questions/items, please contact me at 014670619 or 9841757120. Alternatively, you could reach me at saraswati.dawadi@open.ac.uk.

PART I: Please tick one appropriate answer or provide written answers.

1. Your gender:
☐ Female ☐ Male ☐ Others
2. School's name and district: _____
3. Your school type
☐ Private ☐ Public
4. Your academic qualification: _____
5. Your age:
☐ 21 – 30 yrs ☐ 31 – 40 yrs ☐ 41 – 50 yrs ☐ above 50 yrs
6. Number of years you have been teaching English:
☐ 0 – 5 yrs ☐ 6- 10 yrs ☐ 11 – 15 yrs ☐ 16- 20 yrs
☐ above 20 yrs
7. The typical size of each class at grade 10 you teach in terms of student numbers
☐ 10-20 ☐ 21 – 30 ☐ 31 – 40 ☐ above 40
8. Number of periods you teach English per week:
☐ 6 – 10 ☐ 10 – 15 ☐ 16-20 ☐ 20 – 25
☐ more than 25
9. Have you taken any courses in language testing and evaluation?
☐ yes ☐ no
If yes, please specify _____
10. Have you had any kind of teacher training?
☐ yes ☐ no
If yes, please specify _____
11. Medium of instruction in your class _____

PART II: Please read the following items carefully and tick () the one that suits you best.

12. In your opinion, what are the main reasons for introducing the Grading System in the SLC English test?

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Just to increase pass percentage of students.					
To bring positive changes in classroom practices.					
To eliminate the risk of cheating and other malpractices.					
To disseminate the results quickly, adequately and as transparently as possible.					
If others, please specify here:					

13. How do you judge the SLC English test?

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
It is a fair test in terms of its grading system.					
It is a good indicator of students' ability in using language in real life situations.					
It reflects students' weaknesses and strengths clearly.					
It can discriminate well among the students.					
If others, please specify here:					

14. What are the impacts of the test on student motivation to learn English?

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
The test motivates them to learn English.					
The test discourages them from learning English.					
The test does not affect their motivation to learn English.					
The test has led students to drop out of secondary school.					
If others, please specify here:					

15. What contents and/or skills are focused in your teaching English to Grade 10 students?

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I focus only on the contents that are examined in the test.					
I focus more on reading and writing than on listening and speaking.					
I focus more on listening and speaking than on reading and writing.					
I focus more on integrated skills than on individual skills.					
I have a great focus on grammar and vocabulary.					
If others, please specify here :					

16. Are there any effects of the test on your teaching methodology? (Delete as appropriate) YES/ NO.

If you answered NO, go straight to question 17; if you answered YES, continue to answer the question below, 'Are there any effects of the test on your teaching methodology?'

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I feel that I am driven by the test rather than the textbook/ curriculum.					
The test has led me to teach in ways that contradict my own ideas of good educational practice.					
I focus on skills development in my students.					
If others, please specify here:					

17. How do you assess your students?

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I use real life tasks.					
My classroom tests mirror the tasks of the SLC English test.					
I use the SLC English test papers from previous years.					
I test only the skills tested in the SLC examination.					
If others, please specify here:					

PART III : Please TICK the appropriate answer or provide written answers.

Do you run test preparation classes? (Delete as appropriate) YES/ NO.

If you answered NO, go straight to question 20; if you answered YES, continue question 18 and 19.

18. Approximately how many classes PER YEAR do you spend preparing students for the test?

☐ 1-10 classes

☐ 11-20 classes

☐ 21-30 classes

☐ More than 30 classes

19. When do you run the test preparation activities?

☐ 1-2 months before the test

☐ 3-4 months before the test

☐ 5-6 months before the test

☐ 7-8 months before the test

☐ 9-10 months before the test

☐ Throughout the year

20. Is there anything else you would like to share about the SLC English test and your classroom teaching? If yes, please state below.

Thank you very much for your support!

B. Teacher interview schedule

Interview opening:

Getting to know each other

Telling the interviewee the purpose of the interview

Explaining the purpose of audio recording and asking for permission

Assuring the interviewees that the interview data will be kept confidential and used for research purpose only

Themes	Interview questions/prompts
Grading and test impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you think is the main reason for introducing the grading system in the SLC examination? Why do you think so?
General perceptions about the test	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you think that the SLC English test is a fair test (why/why not)? • Do you think that the test is an accurate measure of student achievement? • How does the test affect students' motivation to learn English? • Do you think that your students' learning is affected by the exam? If yes, in what ways?
Teaching content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you select teaching contents according to the test? • What skills/aspects/contents do you mostly focus? Why? • Discussion about the class observation regarding the contents.
Teaching methodology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you think that your teaching methodology is affected by the test? How? • Discussion about the observed methodology...
Classroom assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you usually assess your students? • Are your classroom assessment tasks similar to the test tasks? How?
Test preparation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How often do you run test preparation classes? Anything else they would like to tell

(Note: These are just guidelines. More questions will emerge through the interviews)

Interview ending : Thanking the interviewee.

C. Class observation scheme

Teaches' name _____ School's name _____ Topic _____

Date _____

Time		Teaching material	Skills focus	Teaching content	Teaching activities	Student work mode	Time	
From	To						Teacher	Student

Key:

Teaching materials : a) textbook b) teacher's guide c) commercial publication d) self-edited material e) others

Skills focus : a) listening b) speaking c) reading d) writing e) integrated skills

Content : vocabulary, grammar, poem, story, etc.

Activity : the column is open ended

Student work mode : a) individual b) pair c) group d) choral

Language : a) English b) Nepali

